WHAT IT MEANS TO STUDY FOOD AT AN HBCU

Bolstered by history, looking toward the future

By Ashanté Reese

I stare at a photo of seven women. They are presumably Spelman College students, tilling the soil of the Oval, the green space around Giles Hall, the historic building that houses my office. The Spelman archivist dates the photo in the 1890s. The women's eyes concentrate on the ground. They aren't smiling. No one recorded their names.

Clad in long skirts, armed with farming tools, the unidentified women grew food as part of their education well before food studies had a name or structure. In this period, it was not uncommon for women's academic training to include homemaking skills, including growing food. My work as an interdisciplinary professor in anthropology and food studies is part of a long legacy.

Spelman students garden outside Giles Hall, circa 1890

I joined the Spelman faculty in 2015 to help build a food studies program that other faculty had been developing for years. I teach black women about food access inequalities, urban agriculture, and the role of race in the food system. What we know as food studies did not exist when Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were founded in the mid-1800s. The role of food in curriculum and campus life, however, was firmly in place. The women in the photo grew food for their own consumption and were likely involved in managing the Spelman College Dairy.

David Ewing illucidates the importance of historically black colleges and universities in the struggle for Civil Rights in Nashville.

Spelman was not the first HBCU to connect food and academic inquiry. HBCUs and other black educational institutions were beacons in the midst of legally enforced white supremacy and segregation. To provide for the campus and build community, students, especially those attending Southern HBCUs, were expected to show industrial and practical skills alongside their academic training. In other ways, the academic and practical training that students received proved to their white counterparts that they deserved full citizenship. Perhaps the best-known example of this is Tuskegee University in Tuskegee, Alabama, founded by Booker T. Washington in 1881—the same year Spelman College was founded.

Washington's approach to educating a newly freed black population was both prophetic and grounded in the realities of the time. In 1895, Washington delivered what is known as the "Atlanta Compromise" speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. In it, he extolled industrial education, lamented the focus on political positions instead of agriculture, and affirmed black labor's value to the economy. It was clear that Washington understood the pursuit of black liberation was twofold: to build self-sufficient communities and to become indispensable in capitalist markets. At odds with W.E.B. DuBois, Washington argued that agricultural training was as important as literary exegesis. An opportunity loomed for black folks

to benefit from agricultural skills to create lives through which they could live as freely as one could in a racist nation. Not all HBCUs exhibited a sustained interest in this logic, however. Many became breeding grounds for black excellence, preparing students for middle- and upper-class careers in line with DuBois' Talented Tenth philosophy.

Today, food studies is a broad, interdisciplinary collection of varied approaches to food, culture, and society. The field is concentrated at predominantly white, co-ed institutions. The reasons for this are varied and complicated. More college and universities are offering majors, minors, and graduate programs. Such programs require both resources and faculty. There are no measures for the sustainability or retention of undergraduate student interest in food studies, which is important for any college because undergraduate tuition dollars are critical to financial health. For HBCUs, histories of agricultural knowledge and production have not manifested in contemporary food studies programs. Funding challenges and consolidation (or elimination) of academic programs are real concerns for HBCUs. So, too, is finding a balance between encouraging students to pursue their interests and preparing them for an ever-changing job market. The pursuit of black excellence at HBCUs often means students favor biology, psychology, business, or other disciplines that promise white-collar jobs. I had a student ask me to break the news to her parents that she did not want to go to medical school. (I declined.) Her anxiety represents a pressing question for many students and families: What is the return on this significant investment?

A laboratory at Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), 1902

Spelman is the only HBCU with a food studies program, though others offer agricultural sciences. North Carolina A&T University maintains a 492-acre farm for research and training. Other schools have creatively incorporated food in other ways. The Ray Charles Program in African American Material Culture at Dillard University aims to "research, document, disseminate, and preserve the culinary patrimony and material culture of African Americans in New Orleans and the South."

Though not a formal food studies program, the Ray Charles Program demonstrates a deep engagement with foodways, infusing it into the fabric of the university, much like earlier HBCUs did with industrial and home economics training. In the spirit of social justice, Paul Quinn College turned its football field into an urban farm to address food access inequalities in south Dallas.

Learn how some HBCUs are creating sustainable campuses and communities.

Beginning in the fall of 2016, Spelman students could officially declare food studies as a minor. Nearly a decade in the making, the program draws on the college's agricultural history to offer students an interdisciplinary approach to studying food. It could not be more relevant or timely. When Southern cities have the highest obesity and diet-related illness rates; when Southern families struggle with food access inequalities; when black activists proclaim that "the South has something to say" in agriculture and food justice—Spelman's program teaches black women to lead the way. Black women, whose visible connections to food are often demonized through narratives of the unhealthy body, are being trained as thought leaders in food-related fields. From courses on the unequal distribution of food to food chemistry, black women students are not the object of study at Spelman. They do the studying. In my courses, we peel back layers of inequality in the global industrialized food systems. We explore how global formations like anti-black racism shape food access worldwide. We also explore resistance. Our students are interested in social problems, yes. And they want to learn how to shape and change the world around them. In that way, they are no different from the faceless, nameless photo that stares back at me from computer screen. They learn. They debate. They connect to and reclaim a legacy that is not visible in the broader field.

Dr. Catarina Passidomo explains the importance of studying food justice in America.

I don't see our program through rose-colored glasses. For every opportunity we have, there are also challenges. Because our program is interdisciplinary and we are a small liberal arts college, our core faculty of four pulls double duty. We have to be creative with our resources and time, which includes our finite human capital. This means I am not only responsible for developing food studies courses that did not exist before I arrived, but I am also tasked with teaching introduction to anthropology, qualitative research methods, and other courses required for sociology and anthropology majors. I am the only faculty member whose central research area is food inequalities, which means that students see me as "the food person" on campus. Juggling teaching, research, and mentoring students who want to do food justice work is taxing. And it is rewarding. Because I know how whiteness permeates and shapes the field, the work I do at Spelman is that of reclamation. The study of food at any HBCU is significant. Food—a lifeline for individual and community health and wellbeing—is both a cultural and social symbol. Black people have navigated enslavement, Jim Crow laws, and anti-black racism. Food has been a constant marker of the social climate during all these periods, an artifact of the creative ingenuity of people on the weightier end of oppression.

The students who have taken an interest in food studies at Spelman are dynamic, they are bright, and they are ready to change the world. Raesha Estep, class of 2019, is one of our first food studies students. The program shapes her as a scholar in ways that she could not have imagined. When she graduates, Raesha plans to pursue a PhD to study urban agriculture and feminist foodways.

What will happen in the next ten, fifteen, or twenty years, when several cohorts of Spelman students have matriculated through the food studies program? What does that mean for the food-related fields some of them will choose to enter? Academic and culinary foremothers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Vertamae Grosvenor, Jessica B. Harris, Psyche Williams-Forson, and Toni Tipton-Martin have already opened doors for them. Our aim is to train curious, theoretically engaged, justice-focused food scholars and activists. If Raesha is any indication of what the legacy of this program is going to be, her gardening foremothers would be proud.

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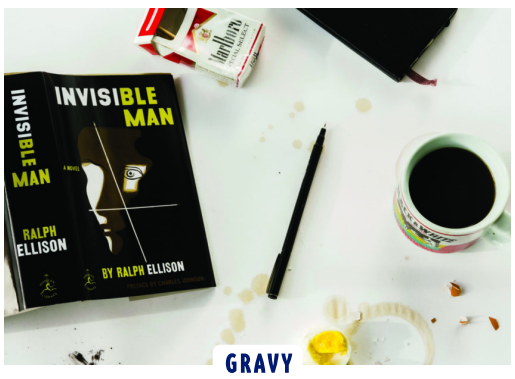

Visible Yam

The best writers, the better writers, know that food is identity, food is alive, food is us.

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